

The Relationship between Man and Animal in Ted Hughes' Poems

RELATIONS ENTRE L'HOMME ET LES ANIMAUX DANS LES POEMES DE TED HUGHES

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Abstract: This paper discusses the significance of Ted Hughes's animal poems, and find out the relationship between human and animals. It analyses from three aspects: man expects to acquire animal power, animals reflects man and enlightenment from animals. Through the analysis, both the content and the consideration on human in Ted Hughes' poems could be better understood.

Key words: Ted Hughes, animal poems, human and animals

Résumé: Cet essai étudie la signification des poème d'animal de Ted Hughes et explore les relations entre l'homme et les animaux. L'analyse s'effectue sous trois angles ci-dessous : l'homme veut acquérir la force des animaux, les animaux reflètent l'homme ainsi que l'homme s'inspire des animaux. A travers cette analyse, la signification et la considération sur l'homme des poèmes de Ted Hughes pourraient mieux comprises.

Mots-Clés: Ted Hughes, poèmes d'animal, homme et animaux

1. INTRODUCTION

Ted Hughes, who obtained the fame of Poet Laureate in 1984, totally had 8 major collections that represented a great variety of forms and subjects during his life. Among them, it's the series of animal images that established his fame of "animal poet" or "nature poet". His special subject matters and bold style made his poems quite different from other contemporary poets. Had been living near the wide moorland and spending a great time on fishing and hunting, he had been attracted by beauty and power of nature since his childhood. However, his feelings towards animals were more than pure appreciation. As a perspective and thoughtful poet, he not only vividly portrayed an animal world in his poems, but also revealed his philosophical thoughts. Between human beings and animals, there are several complex and profound relationships. Apparently, Hughes was inspecting animals in the wild nature, but by deeper analysis of the relationship between animals and human beings, we can find that actually he was expressing his mystical beliefs on human beings through those animals.

2. MAN AND ANIMAL

2.1 Man expects to acquire animal power

In 1957, Ted Hughes published his first poem collection *The Hawk in the Rain*, by which he established his statue as a modern poet in England, and in which his fascination to animal's beauty and power was fully expressed. In *Poetry Today: A Critical Guide to British Poetry* Thwaite wrote that this is a work "concentrates on physical vividness of a mimetic turbulent world of predatory animals and primitive violence." (56) And in this world, human beings are so weak and helpless that they are in awe of the animals as well as deeply admire them.

One of his representative poem entitled "The Hawk in the Rain" opens with the description of "I" walking across a ploughed field in the rain:

"I drown in the drumming ploughland, I drag up
Heel after heel from the swallowing of the earth's
mouth,

From clay that clutches my each step to the ankle
With the habit of the dogged grave,..."

A man is stepping forward in a ploughland while struggling with the rain and the clay that try to swallow

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him like “dogged grave”. Words like “drag up”, “clutches”, “each step” and “habit” indicate that for man, in such a cruel circumstance, it is not just a walk across a ploughland, but a lifelong journey. And soon there is another stanza makes the contrasting situation of the hawk:

“...but the hawk

Effortlessly at height hangs his still eye.”

The hawk revolves in the high sky, coolly looking at man’s desperate struggle against the force of nature. The image of the hawk is like an ambassador of the nature, and under his masterful command, man’s struggle is doomed and weightless.

In his second collection *Lupercal*(1960), his presentation of the animal world is franker and crueler. In “Hawk Roosting”, the poet plunged into the hawk’s head, and recorded its monologue that is imbued with confidence and arrogance.

“There is no sophistry in my body”, and as a hawk, “My manners are just tearing off heads”, because “I hold Creation in my foot”. By far the power of the hawk has extended to be able to master the whole creation, while contrast to it, this power can never be acquired by human beings.

Like the hawk, Hughes tends to choose animals least likely to be befriended by man as his subject matter, such as jaguar, pike, and crow. “It is their rich, instinctual life of feeling and action that most fascinates the poet. His most frequent response to the life of nature seems to be a mixture of awe and fear.”(King, 117) The freedom, energy and power of these animals can easily arouse man’s admiration. In front of animals, man is too timid. How many miseries both from physical and spiritual must have been reduced if man is as strong as animals to endure the cruelty in this merciless modern world! In another word, by means of the impressive description and contrasts, Hughes cried out man’s inner voice in their heart that they are eager to be powerful, just like these animals.

2.2 Animals reflects man

Ted Hughes was often be criticized by some of the criticisms for his apparently deliberate bloody adjectives and trudging phrases that could remind readers as the characters of dictators or Fascists. Indeed, animals in his poems are brutal, primitive, and completely different from human life; however, in the wild nature, “Survival of the fittest” has been universally acknowledged as the rule of living. As far as this is concerned, neither the hawk’s tearing off heads nor does the pike’s killing his companions seem reasonable.

In fact, Hughes’ view has always been wider than the simple labeling of him as “violent poet”. His apparently concerns with violence is not admiration, but an exploration of the battle of man’s response towards

life. It includes two levels. On the one hand, during the process of hundreds of thousands years of evolution, man became civilized, intellectual and rational, and in the society they are constrained by a series of laws and social norms. Having been bounded since they were born; their instinct and primordial side as animals finally have to be broke out in a violent way. This is vividly expressed in Hughes’ animal poems. In “The Pike”:

“Killers from the egg: the malevolent aged grin.

Three we kept behind glass,

...

Suddenly there were two.

Finally one”.

Pike is a kind of predatory fish that is greedy and brutal, and when they are hungry, they would attack each other until there is only one, the strongest, left. On the other hand, though this “jungle law” also suits for human society, it is always displayed in some other forms, which are different as animals that can directly “tearing off heads”. Pike’s world is a microcosm of the human society that is full of extreme individualism and brutality. Under the control of these qualities, man will be extremely conceited and exclude outsiders by every conceivable means. Those who have higher social statues or stronger power can always obtain more priority and enjoy more of life by stepping on the back of the weaker. During this process, the stronger grows stronger, and the weaker become feebler and finally died. Therefore, it is not fair for human beings to say that animals are brutal or primitive, and such characters of animals are the exactly reflections of the violent side of human beings.

Beside the violent side of man, in Hughes’ fourth collection *Crow*(1970), he portrayed the image of the crow, which embodied the inner experience of modern man who, being spiritually hollowed and lacking religious belief, faced a meaningless existence of themselves in a rapidly industrializing world. Undoubtedly, the crow is a new hero. It reproduced and re-explained the religious myth, power and civilization from its peculiar viewpoint and manner. In “Crow’s First Lesson”:

“God tried to teach Crow how to talk.

“Love,”said God. “Say, Love.”

Crow gaped, and the white shark crashed into the sea
And went rolling downwards, discovering its own depth.

“A final try,” said God. “Now, Love.”

Crow convulsed, gaped, retched and

Man’s bodiless prodigious head

Bulbed out onto the earth, with swiveling eyes,

Jabbering protest

As a result of the developing of the science and industrial, the traditional center status of the religion has lost. The authority of God is challenged and shaken by the crow. According to Anthony Thwaite, "Crow has two characters——Crow himself and the God. Crow is resilient, resourceful, evasive, built to survive every kind of disaster(——these are his irreducible characters). God is sometimes his partner, sometimes his adversary or rival, often a passive presence." (60) Possibly man is the combination of the two. In such an embarrass world, the Crow is the only language remaining and his songs sing of modern man's feeling of alienation and disillusion from those deep power both within themselves and the outer world.

2.3 Enlightenment from animals

If the image of animal in Hughes' poems is a mirror that clearly reflected modern man's inner turbulence, then we can say it is more than an ordinary mirror, and it is a magic one that can bring inspiration to human and broadcast Hughes' profound concerns about modern man's way of living.

In "Poetry in the Making", Ted Hughes declared his beliefs on his poems creation that poems were animals, and what he concerned was not hunting for them, nor writing poems for them, but finding out the energy on them, which he was lacking of. In other words, Hughes tried to call for a balance between human's social consciousness and their primordial side, which was dying gradually during the process of civilization and industrialization. He did not arouse man's consciousness by setting a stereotype of living force or a didactic instruction, but by delicately creating representative philosophical animal figures.

One of his famous mythical figures——crow, which appears in one poem after another, comes to stand for various different aspects of human experience: it is ugly, unpredictable, but wisdom, strong-minded and optimistic; it is the symbol of new human spirit——self-conscious, confident and irresistible; and in this merciless and pointless world, it is the only one that can survive all kinds of disasters. By contrast, modern men who are dominated by rational objective intellect have obviously degenerated into sterility and nihilism at the expense of the life of the emotions and imagination. In "Examination at the Womb Door", crow is cross-examined:

"Who owns those scrawny little feet? Death
Who owns this bristly scorched-looking face?
Death
Who owns these still-working lungs? Death
...
Who is the stronger than death? Me, evidently"

To all the questions except the last one, crow gives the same answer "death", while finally, he declared with

the least hesitation that he is the strongest of all, even than death. When man of late 20th century has lost their faith, it is the crow that "flies over the abyss of our unbelief and incomprehension". (King, 138) Beneath the feeling of despair there was still an active voice of unyielding energy and survival——the voice of the crow. Through perceiving of this bold crow, Hughes set a model to modern man that they can only break through to a new wholeness of themselves by learning from the experience of the crow.

Similar to "Crow", in "The Jaguar", when men crowded in the front of the jaguar's cage, with admiration in their eyes, they see from the jaguar a kind of wildness, freedom and primitive instincts that they never have. As a result, the jaguar became the symbol of releasing of the natural character of human beings.

Another figure is the skylark. Appeared as a fierce creature that carries strength, fortitude and indomitable spirit in Hughes' poems, the skylark becomes another symbol of a fight to endure in a hostile universe.

"But just before they plunge into the earth

They flare and glide off low over grass, then up

To land on a wall-top, crest up

Weightless,

Paid-up,

Alert,

Conscience perfect."

This is an accurately observed picture of a skylark's behavior. Its flight seems a battle to overcome gravity and escape its natural habitat. The skylark doesn't submit to "life center", but follows its inner nature at whatever cost of pain. So "conscience" is "perfect". "It is an image of man whose experience of life's agonies bludgeons him into believing there is no meaning in life but who yet resists and rises again and again simply to express his existence even when there is no guarantee that existence is purposeful." (King, 128)

2.4 Human and animals live in harmony

An important book entitled *The Silent Spring* was published in 1962, which is a masterpiece on science of human and environment. Influenced by this book, Ted Hughes reconsidered the role of both man and animals, and realized that man would better respect and preserve the nature rather than fight against it. Consequently, in his late collections, such as *Season Songs* (1985) and *River* (1983), his view of nature and animals became wider, and his style changed to be softer and pastoral-like. The relationship between human and animals is no longer contrasting to each other, but turned to be very harmonious and friendly. In "That Morning",

"Two gold bears came down and swam like men

Beside us. And dived like children”

Animals are not presented as cruel and non-humane, while human beings are not only portrayed in a passive statue. On the contrary, they are living in the same picture, enjoying the same happiness each as a chain of the nature.

3. CONCLUSION

It is undoubted that Ted Hughes is a gifted poet who has rich imagination and originality of expression. The

animal world in his works leaves with reader a sense of primitive impulse, which deeply affected both our emotions and ration. His works help modern man recognize their own identity as both human and animals, though they might be reluctant to acknowledge their deepest, instinctual side as animals is gradually losing. His increasingly deep concerns about the relationship between human and animals also enlighten human beings' living way in this world that they should combine both human nature and animal nature to be wholeness. Human and animals can genially live together to establish a peaceful, new world, since human beings are also animals somehow.

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